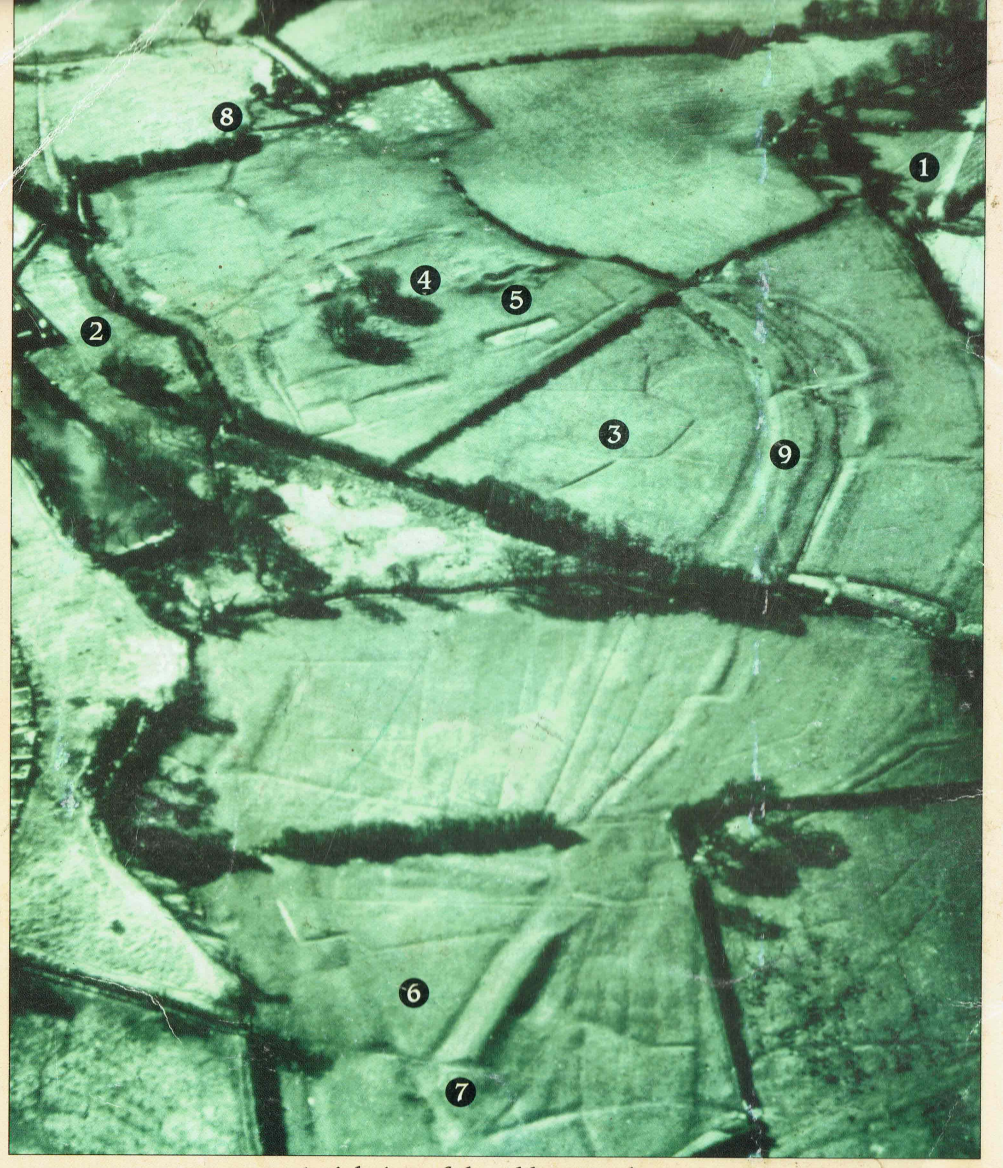


Aerial view of the Abbey Meadows
(Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs: copyright reserved).

1. River Arrow
2. Batchley Brook or Red Ditch
3. Old river course
4. Cloister
5. Abbey church
6. Abbey mill pond
7. Mills and workshops
8. Gateway chapel
9. Fishponds

Bordesley Abbey Visitor Centre and Forge Mill Needle Museum
Needle Mill Lane, Riverside, Redditch, Worcs. B97 6RR
Tel: Redditch 62509

The Abbey Meadows Trail

A guided walk around the medieval site of
Bordesley Abbey
Redditch, Worcestershire

The Bordesley Abbey Project

Bordesley Abbey is one of the few monastic sites in the country which has its entire precinct surviving as a complex set of earthworks (see back cover). The site is also remarkable because of its well preserved archaeology. Accordingly, a sustained programme of excavation and research began in 1969 and continues to the present day.

The purpose of this booklet is to guide the visitor around the precinct, describing what has been found by excavation and also what may still be hidden in the soil.

The authors are indebted to the Directors of the Bordesley Abbey Project, to all those other people who have contributed to the project and to James Woodward who carried out the first excavations in the Abbey Meadows in 1864 (and whose book "The History of Bordesley Abbey" provided some of our illustrations!).

The authors are also greatly indebted to the following organisations for their financial support, without which this booklet could not have been published:- The Bordesley Society, the Charles Henry Foyle Trust, the John and Ruth Howard Charitable Trust and Redditch Amenity Trust.

Debbie Fanshawe, Chrissie Freeth, Jo-Ann Gloger, Barry Mead, Kate Phillipson, Pam Regan and Sue Werner. April 1994.

Useful Information

1. **Toilets.** There are no toilets in the Abbey Meadows. So before you start your walk, feel free to use the toilets in the Museum complex (no charge!).
2. **Footwear.** The meadows can be boggy underfoot, even in the summer Please wear sensible footwear for your ramble.
3. **Pushchairs and Wheelchairs.** Unfortunately, parts of the Trail are not suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs.
4. **Countryside Code.** The meadows are frequently grazed by sheep. Therefore, please close all gates and keep dogs on leads.
5. **The Abbey Church.** Bordesley Abbey is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Please help to preserve it by **not** climbing on the walls.

Further information from

THE BORDESLEY ABBEY VISITOR CENTRE

Needle Mill Lane, Riverside, Redditch, Worcs. B97 6RR (Tel: Redditch 62509)

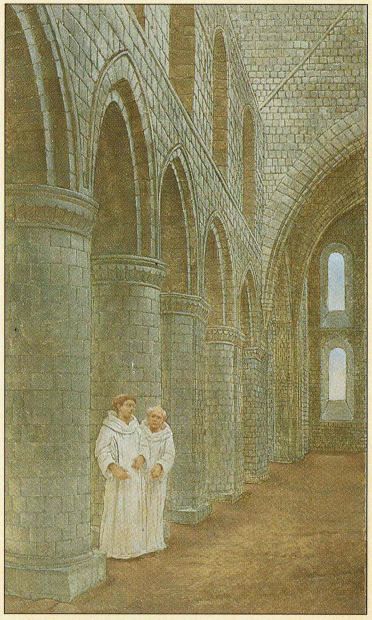
Front cover: A detail from a 19th century painting of the abbey by J M Woodward, showing how he imagined it might have looked.

The Abbey Meadows Trail

introduction

Welcome to The Abbey Meadows Trail. This guide will take you around the Abbey Meadows explaining some of the features that once formed part of this ancient monastic site. It includes a tour of the remains of the abbey church.

The map on the centre pages shows the suggested route. The numbers on the map correspond to numbers in the text. The trail will take approximately 1–1½ hours and is over fairly rough ground. However, you don't have to do the whole route if you don't want to! Feel free to wander around as you like, using the map to assist you.



The abbey church as it may have looked in about 1150.

Bordesley Abbey is unusual because the whole of the monastery is preserved as a complicated series of humps and bumps (or "earthworks") which extend over 36 hectares (98 acres). This makes it one of the largest monastic precincts in the country. The meadows, then, contain a record of how the monks lived in and changed the Arrow Valley between the 12th and 16th centuries.

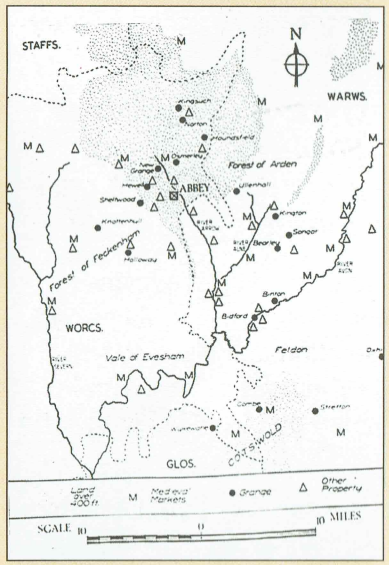
In 1140 a group of Cistercian monks from Garendon Abbey in Leicestershire were granted land in the Arrow Valley by Waleran de Beaumont, Count of Meulan and Earl of Worcester. This enabled them to found Bordesley Abbey and turn the Arrow Valley into a place suitable for a monastery.

Archaeological evidence shows that, when the monks arrived, the valley was a marshy, inhospitable place, unsuitable for the construction of the large buildings necessary for an abbey community. The first monks, however, were not daunted. They dug a complex drainage system, diverted the River Arrow and moved huge quantities of soil to provide level platforms to build on.

At first, temporary buildings of wood were probably constructed. But within a few years they were replaced in stone. However, one of the buildings, the church, was often repaired and rebuilt when the monastery could attract funds from patrons or when the structure became unsafe.

You have to imagine the precinct at Bordesley as a very busy place, not unlike a small town, with many people (including lay brothers) carrying out a variety of activities to keep the community going. Yet amongst all the coming and going the monastery had a peaceful centre – the church and cloister – for prayer and study.

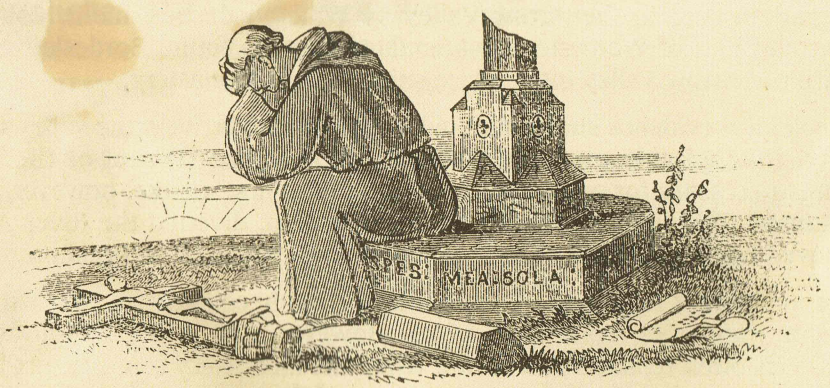
A lay-brother (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).



Bordesley Abbey estates.

The precinct was at the heart of the monastery's estates. Its lands, grouped around 20 farms or "granges", were mostly in Worcestershire and Warwickshire and the sale of produce – cereals and especially wool – gave Bordesley much of its wealth.

Bordesley Abbey's prosperity, however, was not to last. In 1538 Henry VIII dissolved the monastic houses and Bordesley Abbey was demolished and its estates sold. The monks (20 of them) were pensioned off. Nearly all the buildings in the meadows were pulled down and what was left was soon overgrown. The ruins remained buried until J M Woodward excavated in 1864. Then, in 1969, the Bordesley Abbey Project Team began a sustained programme of excavation and research which continues to the present day. The majority of the remains, however, are still hidden beneath the earthworks in the meadows. By studying these earthworks, by excavation and by looking at other abbeys, a picture is beginning to emerge of what has been hidden for over 450 years.



The last monk (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).

The trail begins...

1. The trail begins on the wooden bridge between the Visitor Centre and car park.

You are standing over Batchley Brook which is also known as the Red Ditch. This stream was diverted by the monks to help drain the valley and took its name from the red clay through which it flows. In monastic times, the brook formed the southern boundary of the abbey precinct.

2. From the bridge, walk (north-west) across the fields to the tall Redwood tree and the site of St. Stephen's Gateway Chapel. On the way you will go through a dry ditch which once supplied water to the abbey kitchen and latrines.

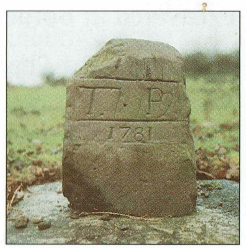
3. The Chapel was built in the early 1200s and stood by the main entrance to the abbey precinct. It served travellers, visitors to the abbey and the people of Redditch. It survived the 1538 Dissolution and was used until 1805. It was then demolished and replaced by the Chapel-on-the-Green in Redditch town centre. The Redwood tree was planted by J M Woodward, who excavated at Bordesley Abbey.

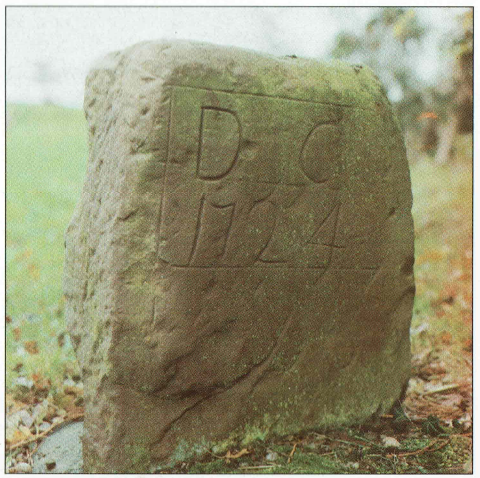
The site of the Chapel is marked in concrete and gravel today and it is hard to imagine that it was once a place of worship. This 19th century painting by C Woodward suggests what the exterior of the Chapel may have looked like.

In the graveyard you can see some unusual gravestones. Most of the gravestones are small and simply inscribed, often with just initials and a date. The shapes of some of these stones also suggest that some have come from the abbey ruins and may have been used by poorer people who could not afford gravestones. Indeed, certain stones appear to have been later re-used by other families, indicated by different initials and dates on the reverse of the stones!

Some individuals can be identified since the burial registers still survive. For example, the stone inscribed "EL 1716" may be for Elizabeth Luis (Lewis) who was buried here on 4th November 1716.

Can you find these gravestones?





A monk in working dress (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).

4. Leave the Chapel site and walk (north) up the hillside.

From the top of the hill you can see, on your left and in the valley below, part of a bank (topped by hedges and trees) which was built to mark the extent of Bordesley's precinct. The earth bank was probably crowned by a hedge or close-set timber fence with a ditch either side to retain animals. In the valley bottom, the bank also acted as a flood barrier – the River Arrow lies just beyond it, masked by the trees.

5. Descend the hill, walking (north-east) towards a wooden bridge.

The bridge crosses the ditch which took water from the River Arrow to supply the fishponds. If you look behind you, in low light it is possible to see that the hillside is corrugated, which indicates that there were ploughed fields in this part of the precinct.

6. Cross over the bridge, turn right and you will see the River Arrow to your left.

This formed the northern boundary of the precinct. It is roughly from this point that the monks diverted the river on to its present course.
(If you are lucky you may see a kingfisher here).

7. Turn right again and follow the high bank with a hawthorn hedge to your right.

The purpose of this substantial bank is not clear, but it may have been another flood barrier to protect the fields.

8. Follow the bank to the fishponds and continue your walk (east) along the right hand side of the water-filled pond.

In fact, you are now walking between two ponds; the one on the right has silted up. Fish was important in the monks' diet and the community mostly ate fish which was bought from markets. The ponds were stocked with fish which was only eaten on special occasions such as the visit of an important guest or on feast days.

About half way along the ponds, look across the dry pond to the adjoining flat meadow. You may be able to see the original course of the River Arrow, which shows up as a shallow, dry ditch (with patches of dark green rushes) in the shape of a reversed letter 'S'. In periods of heavy rain, the Arrow sometimes bursts its banks and flows along its original course.

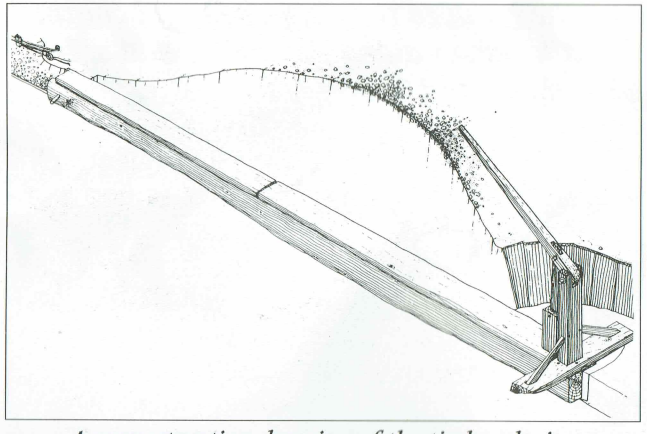
9

9. Continue your walk between the ponds. At the gravel path turn left and almost immediately cross over the brick-built bridge. Follow a rough track (south east) to the banks of a dry, triangular-shaped mill pond.

The shape of the pond is easiest to see when standing on its left hand bank. If you look back towards the brick bridge you will see traces of a silted up ditch with a bank on its right side. This channel brought water from the fishponds to the mill pond. You can also see that the bank on which you are standing ends in a low, flat platform which was probably the site of a stone building which controlled the water entering the pond.

The timber drain as excavated.

A shallow depression is found half way along this bank – this is a back-filled excavation trench. Beneath, a well preserved late 12th century drain (constructed from a 10 metre long hollowed-out tree trunk) was found. This drain took water from the pond, under the bank to flow into the precinct boundary ditch beyond.



A reconstruction drawing of the timber drain.

The pond is silted up and is now dry but between c.1185 and c.1400 it stored water to power a succession of watermills at the nearby industrial workshops.

10

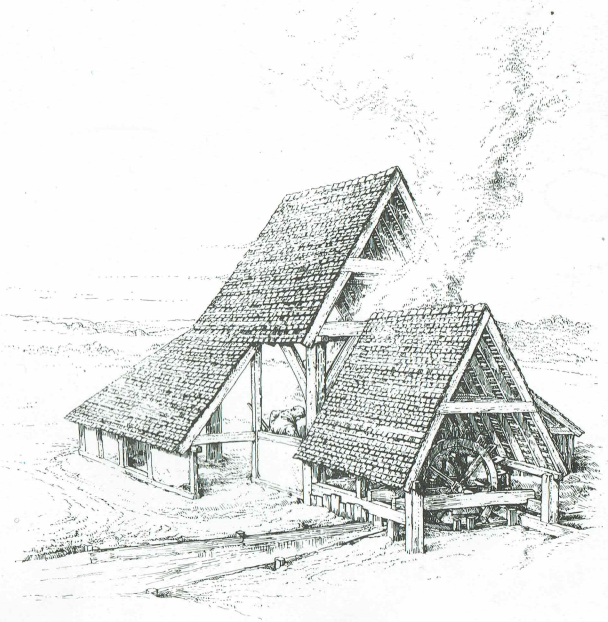
10. If you now walk towards the other end of the bank you arrive at the apex of the triangle, just beyond which were the industrial watermills and workshops.

Timber tail race (c. 1350 – 1400).

Watermills are often mentioned in historical documents and were common machines in medieval England. However, very few have been located or excavated. The Bordesley mills are important because they proved to be unusually well-preserved when excavated in the 1980s.

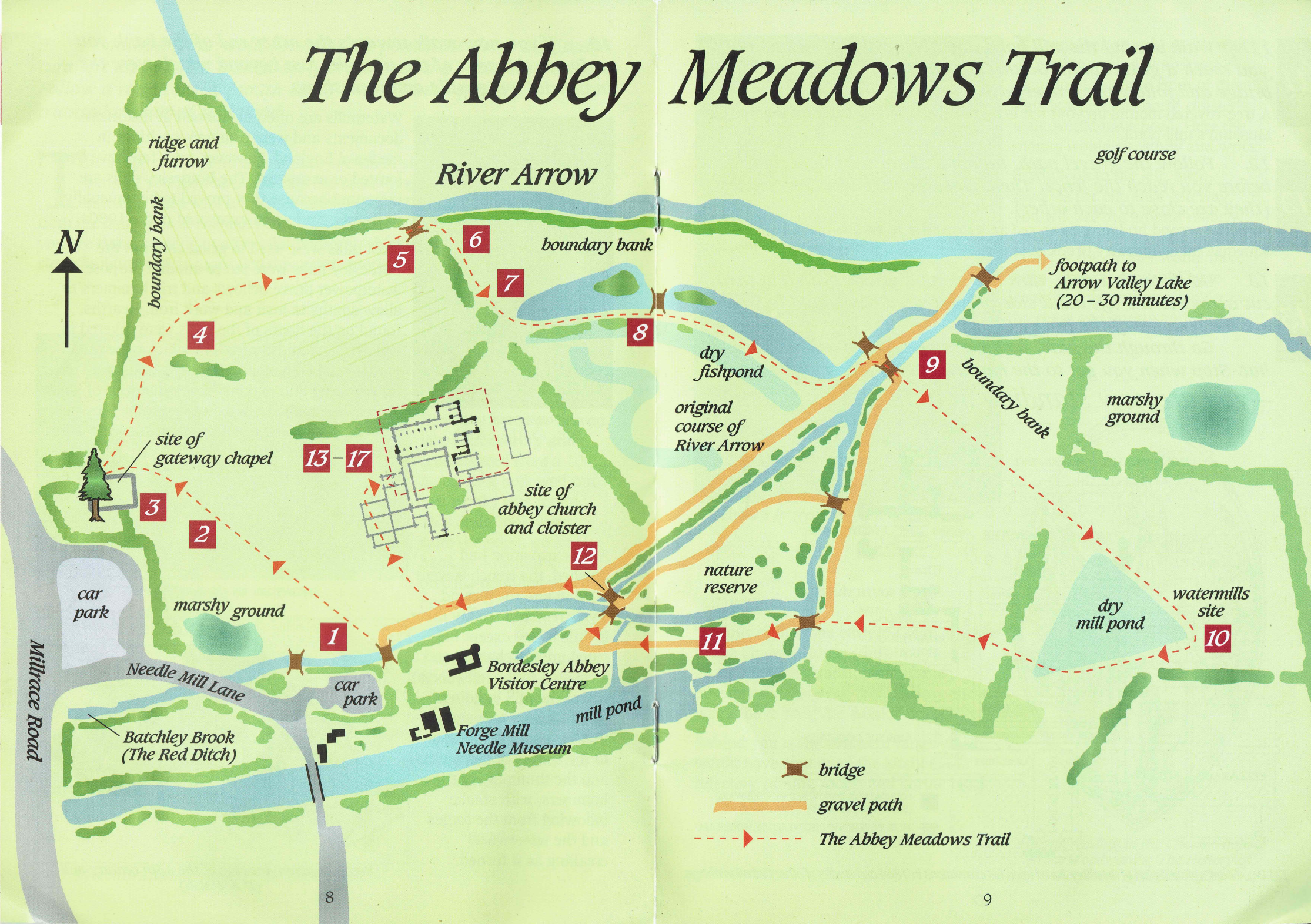
Most mills were used to grind corn but the Bordesley mills were put to another purpose. The waterpower drove bellows and trip hammers to allow smiths to heat and work iron. Hearths found on the floors of the mills were covered in layers of ash and charcoal in which were found partly-finished metal objects. The mills were used for repairing and making large quantities of small objects like nails, knives and weapons; they not only supplied the community with such items but also the local markets.

After excavation had finished, the trenches were filled in and the ground levels restored. Today there is little to see except the silted up mill channel and a level area to the left (north) where the mill buildings stood. But try to imagine this area once resounding to the shouts of the smiths and the thumping of trip hammers, with smoke billowing from the forges and the waterwheel creaking as it turned.



Reconstruction drawing of the 13th century mill (D A Walsh).

The Abbey Meadows Trail



11

11. Walk around the mill pond and keep walking (west) until you reach a gravel path. Go through the gate, over the wooden bridge and follow the gravel path.

A tree-covered mound on your left is part of the retaining bank for the Needle Museum's mill pond.

12

12. Follow the gravel path, taking a sharp turn right just before you reach the fence. Then, cross the two wooden bridges (they are close to each other).

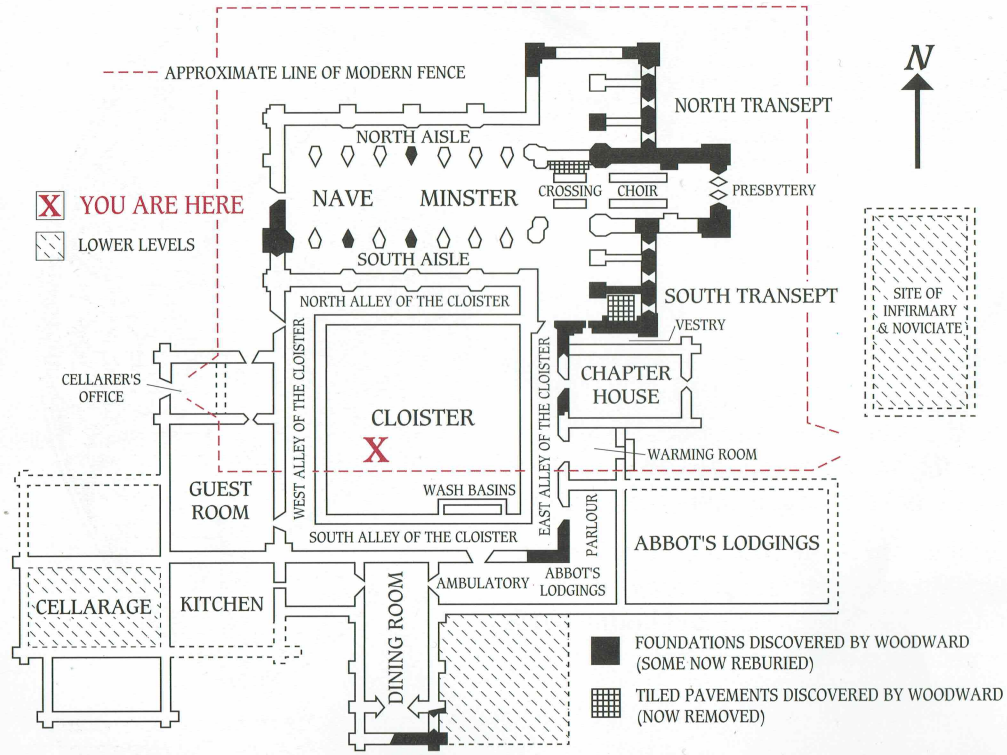
From the second bridge you can see an interesting feature; a brick-built aqueduct takes Batchley Brook over the Needle Museum's tailrace.

13

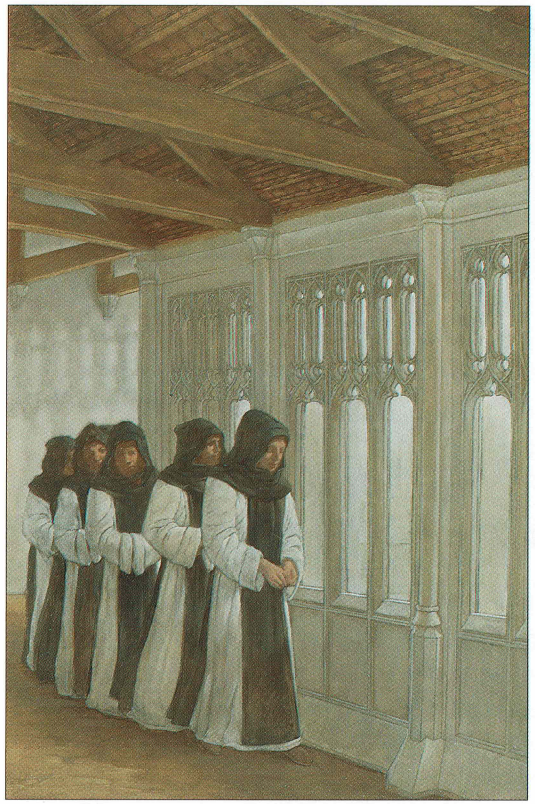
13. Go through a gate, turn left along a gravel path and then cut across to the left hand side of the fenced compound in which are the remains of the Abbey Church.

Go through the gate, down a bank and towards the brown hut. Stop when you get to the modern paving slabs

– you are now standing in a medieval cloister!



J M Woodward's ground plan of the abbey based upon his excavations in 1864 and studies of other Cistercian abbeys.



Artist's impression of the cloister walk (D A Walsh).

If you look (north) at the wall remains you will notice the ground rising in front of them. This is where the north cloister walk would have been. Here the monks would sit, study and write.

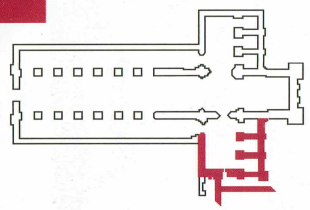
If you look to the left, back towards the entrance gateway, you will see the ground rising again. This is where the western range of the cloister would have been. This range would have contained accommodation for lay brothers and guests and storage rooms.

To your right is the eastern range, the site of the Chapter–house (the abbey's administrative centre), parlour and possibly the warming room. Above these would have been the monks' dormitory.

Behind you is the southern range which would have contained the kitchen, refectory (dining room) and latrine block.

A monk reading in the Chapter-house (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).

14. *Walk towards the abbey ruins and descend two stone steps into a rectangular room.*



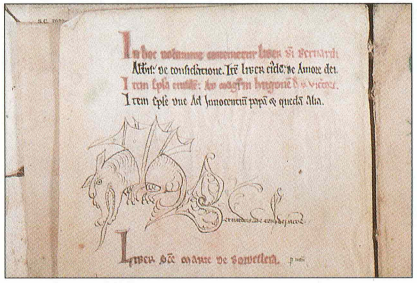
The vestry and south transept.

You are now standing in **the vestry.** This is where the monks kept their sacred vessels and vestments. At one time, the vestry was divided in two and the far end was used as a book store. You can still see recesses in the stonework which were probably for shelves in book cupboards.

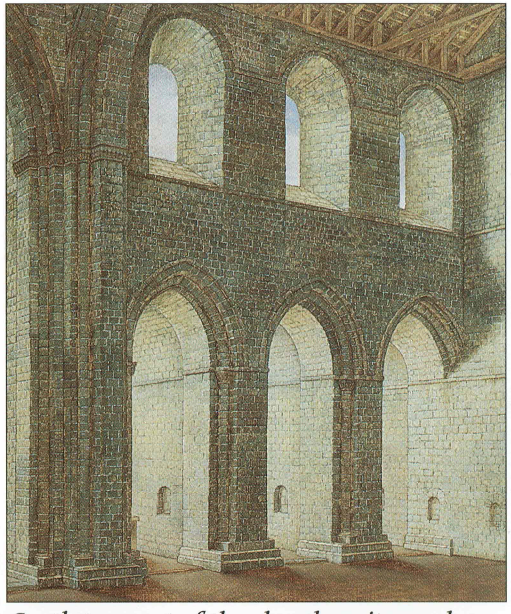
Detail from a 15th century vestment probably used at Bordesley (note the large 'B' in the design).

15. *Leave the vestry through the narrow doorway.*

If you look closely at the left hand wall of the doorway you will see an iron pivot on which a door hung. Once through the doorway, you will find yourself in **the south transept** of the church. There is not much standing so you will have to use your imagination!



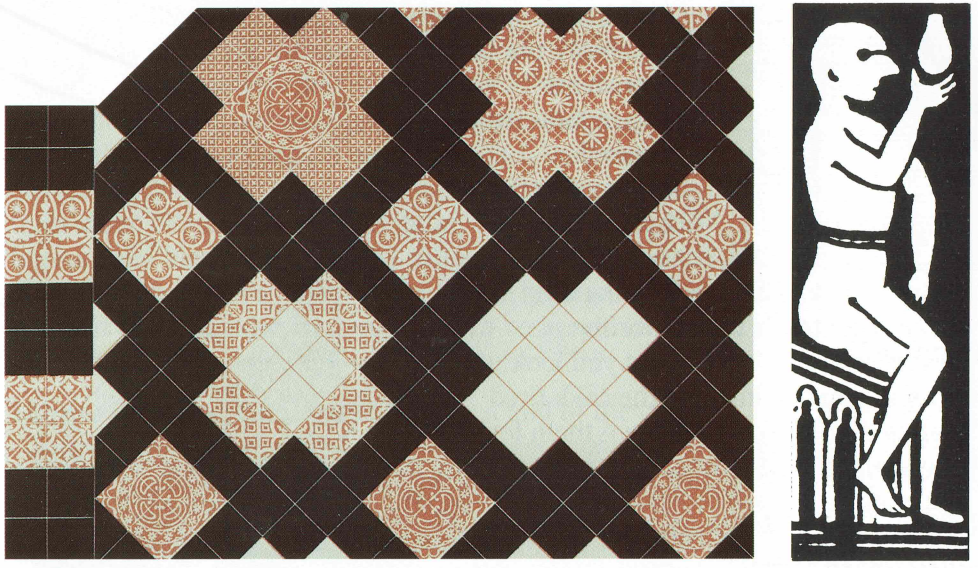
Page from a book probably written at Bordesley in the 12th century.



South transept of the church as it may have looked in about 1150.

The ground on which you are walking is at the same level as the church floor in the 13th and 14th centuries.

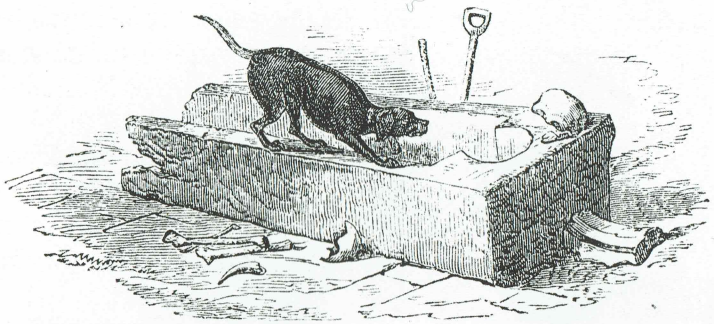
The first stone church was built with a local, greenish sandstone. In line with Cistercian ideals of simplicity, the walls were plain, the windows were unglazed and the floors were of earth and rushes. You can imagine what a cold and dismal place it must have been at times.



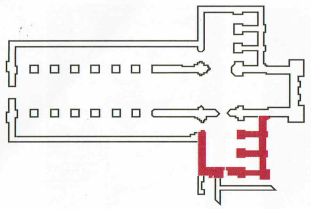
Woodward's drawings of a tiled floor and a tile which he discovered in the abbey church in 1864.

To your right are three side chapels. Excavations show that each chapel had two steps (or "sills") – one at the entrance and another across the middle, with an altar to the east. The limestone paving in the first and second chapels is modern. When J M Woodward excavated in the first chapel he found a floor of decorated tiles. While he was recording this floor he claimed to have seen a ghostly black dog, said to be the ghost of Guy de Beauchamp, second Earl of Warwick. He was nicknamed the Black Dog of Arden and was probably buried in the abbey in 1315.

The third chapel contains tile fragments found during modern excavations. Some of these fragments have been relaid here and give you an idea of what medieval tiles look like. See if you can find the tile of the "Monkey Doctor" holding a flask. Other designs include the coats of arms of patrons who left something of value to the church.



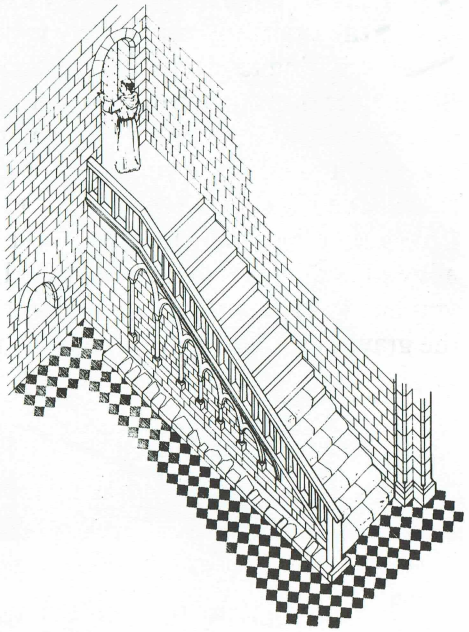
The Black Dog (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).



The south transept.

Opposite the chapels are the night stairs. These connected the monks' dormitory to the church. They are called the night stairs because the monks used them to get to the church for the service at about 2.00am. As you look at them you can imagine the cold, tired monks dutifully coming down them for prayers. It is not surprising that the skeletons of the monks show us most of them suffered from arthritis.

At the foot of the night stairs, a doorway (left) leads into the south aisle.



Reconstruction drawing of the night stairs as they might have looked in about 1200.

16

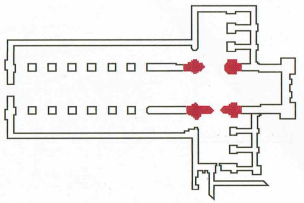
16. Leave the south transept through a gap flanked by ornately carved reddish-brown sandstone.

The column (or "pier") on the right shows evidence of building alteration. You can see that the original pier of green sandstone was extended using reddish-brown sandstone. This work was carried out in about 1300. Notice also that only the outer faces of the piers and walls were carved. The centres, not normally visible, were filled with rubble which included old, broken floor and roof tiles. If you look closely you can see these tiles.

On the other side of the pier you can see evidence of lime washing. This was done to cover over the oddly matched sandstones. Red lines were then painted on to represent false jointing. If you look carefully you can see traces of the original red lines on the stonework.

A tile illustration (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).

By the 13th century the monks had begun to lose their original ideals of simplicity.
The windows were now glazed and the floors tiled.

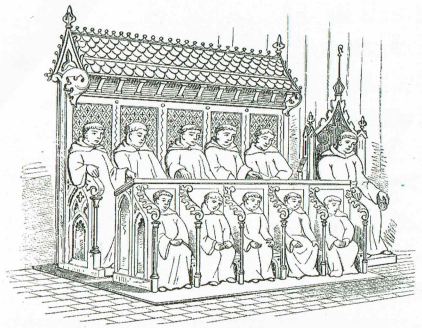


The crossing.

Once through the gap you will find yourself in **the crossing**. Above here would have been the crossing tower, the highest point of the church. In the floor of the crossing you will notice what might at first sight look like baths. They are, in fact, excavated graves. The first grave you see contains a coffin made from stone blocks. The second coffin, however, is carved from a solid block of sandstone. It has a headrest and the drainage holes allowed body fluids to drain away! These graves are likely to be for patrons – you had to be wealthy and important to be buried inside the church. Although the graves look small, they were for adults.

The monks were buried outside the east end of the church.

Artist's impression of the re-modelling of the south-west crossing pier in the late 13th century (D A Walsh).



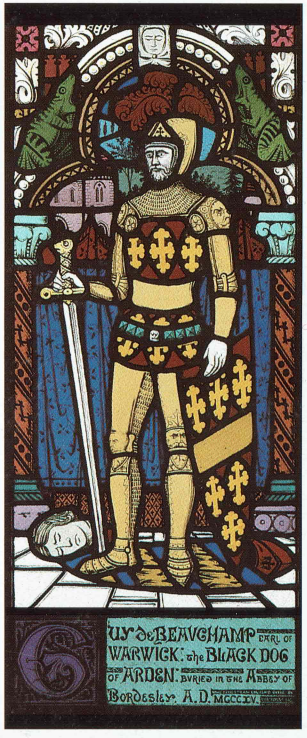
A semi-choir of monks and novices (from Woodward's 'The History of Bordesley Abbey' 1866).

You can also see in the crossing blocks of stone sticking out of the gravel. This is part of the north-west crossing pier which collapsed in the early 14th century – evidence of the unstable land on which the church was built. Along the walls flanking either side of the graves would have been wooden choir stalls.

Within the grass-covered mound in front of you are the (unexcavated) remains of the north transept.

To your left is the nave of the church. It has only been partly excavated and the west doorway is thought to lie beneath the grass-covered mound in front of the metal fence. The nave was originally used by the lay brothers. Wooden screens separated the nave from the eastern part of the church.

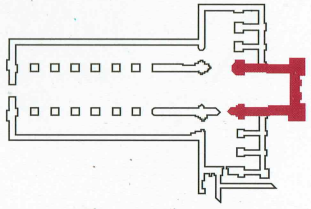
17



19th century stained glass window depicting the Earl of Warwick, possibly buried at Bordesley in 1315.

17. Leave the crossing and go up the stone step into the presbytery.

This was a lofty space. The end (east) wall once contained an impressive array of windows. On your left is a coffin of green sandstone, which has been partly restored. This coffin was first found by Woodward. He believed it belonged to the Earl of Warwick and that by disturbing the skeleton within he had released the ghost.



The presbytery.

The principal altar was sited at the east end of the presbytery in the centre. In the south wall, to the right of this altar, the remains of a stone seat or 'sedilia' for the officiating monks can be seen. Near here was a stone piscina for washing the ritual vessels used in the mass.

The trail ends...

The demolition of Bordesley Abbey (D A Walsh).

The abbey survived for over four hundred years in what was always a difficult environment. However, in July 1538 it was forced to surrender to Henry VIII during his campaign to dissolve the monastic houses. In September 1538 a sale was held and what you see today is the aftermath of this sale, demolition and later robbing.

A few abbey churches, like Tintern, survive in relatively good condition. Unfortunately, the condition of Bordesley is typical of many abbeys in the British Isles.

Leave the abbey compound and head back to the Visitor Centre and car park.

We hope you have enjoyed your tour of the Abbey Meadows. If you would like to find out more about the abbey and see some of the excavated finds, you will find a visit to the Visitor Centre worthwhile. The Visitor Centre is adjacent to the Needle Museum which offers a fascinating insight into nearly 4 centuries of needlemaking in the Redditch area.